

The Voices of *The Waste Land* and their Narrative Function: A Narrative Approach to T. S. Eliot

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Abstract: Since its publication in 1922, *The Waste Land* has attracted a multitude of approaches over the years. This perdurable attention shows how the processes of reading *The Waste Land* still uncover new aspects of the poem. Nevertheless, the postclassical developments of narratology provide innovative models that can be applied to texts which were not previously analyzed through narrative methods. Indeed, even if classical narratology traditionally excluded lyrical poetry, a postclassical narrative approach allows the analysis of lyrical texts. This inquiry pursues an investigation of the narrative features of *The Waste Land*, aiming to expand the classical narrative view traditionally focused on the text.

The theoretical treatment of this inquiry pursues Peter Hühn's definition of narratology applied to lyrical texts. As he dismisses a primary function of the plot, the narratological devices can analyze every text that transmits a message.

According to this inquiry, the structural analysis of narrative elements of *The Waste Land* reveals the function of the voices of the poem as the direct linguistic expression of a specific subject. Indeed, the structure of the poem suffers from a proper lack of action: nevertheless, the textual dimension of the poem emerges from the articulation of the voices as sources of meaning.

Keywords: T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, Voices, Narrative theory, Lyric Narrative, Postclassical Narrative, Lyrical Structural Pattern.

Since its publication, *The Waste Land* has attracted an imperishable interest among literary critics, and still today, this poem represents a perpetual source of analysis. On the centenary

of its appearance, it still gathers new readings of these Eliotian characteristics, especially considering developments in literary criticism. The postclassical developments of narrative theories also work as the background for this paper, as it seeks to give a new understanding of its narrative construction. Indeed, while the narrative features of *The Waste Land* represented an object of analysis over the last century, the advance in narrative theory allows an innovative approach to their interpretation. This analysis considers the structural features as a means for the elucidation of the role of narrativity in Eliot's ideological account.

Nevertheless, the analysis of the structural pattern of Eliot's poem needs to consider the elements of narrative in *The Waste Land*. Indeed, the modern nature of Eliot's work, with its fragments form, evokes the dissolution of narrative unity, emerging from the lack of a proper plot. Nevertheless, the textual dimension of Eliot's work emerges from articulating the voices and patterns in which these perspectives alternate through the poem's sections. These voices function as sources of meaning, delineating the narrative path of the poem. Indeed, the voices of the poem offer a narrative reading of the structure of *The Waste Land*, performing as the fundamental architecture of the narrative pattern of Eliot's poem.

The Narrativity of *The Waste Land*

Before approaching Eliot's poem, it is necessary to elucidate a methodological statement about the procedure adopted through the analysis. The theoretical treatment of how narratology can be adapted to lyrical text pursues Peter Hühn's definition: he recognises that traditionally, the narrative theory has tended to restrict its focus to the analysis of narrative fiction, particularly on the prose defined by the device of the storytelling. Lyric poems, however, feature the same "constituents as narrative fiction," which Hühn defines as referring to a temporal sequence of happenings mediated from a particular perspective (Hühn 3). Furthermore, on the level of textual expression, the act of utterance in lyrical poems develops through the articulation of the sequence of happenings with the mediation of the "medium" of a verbal text.

The historical reception of *The Waste Land* demonstrates the issue exerted by narrativity in Eliot's work, as literary criticism has not considered the nature of this story necessarily narrative. In 1957, the literary critic Northrop Frye considered *The Waste Land* an oppositional work rather than attributed to fictional modes. He would disagree with the narrative assumptions of Eliot's poem. However, more recent interpretations tend to consider *The Waste Land* a poem with a narrative pattern, as Michael Levenson's interpretation of Eliot's work.

Firstly, the narrative features of *The Waste Land* require an incisive inquiry—more precisely, whether this typology of text permits a narrative inquiry. Noticeably, a text assumes a narrative dimension when it narrates something—and it might be tempting to provide an adequate definition of what makes a text a narrative text. Otherwise, Mieke Bal indicated a considerable definition of narrative theory as a "toolbox," or more accurately, "a range of approaches to text that can be considered, partially or wholly, narrative" (Bal 7).

Brian McHale explained why narrativity in lyric poetry remained controversial and problematic: "Modernism marks a crisis in the long poem: it interdicts narrative modes of organisation and submits the long-poem genre to a general "lyricization." The result is a long poem lacking any continuous narrative but instead made up of lyric fragments strung together in sequence. While not utterly banished, narrative shifts to another level, becoming the invisible "master narrative" that, present nowhere in the text, nevertheless ensures the text's ideological (if not formal) coherence. *The Waste Land* is paradigmatic in this regard" (McHale 162).

Canonically, a narrative structure is traditionally associated with prose texts, while narratological analysis usually omits lyrical works. Although, there is another distinction between lyrical poetry and narrative poetry, considering the latter as the kind of poetry in which there is a voice, which is not the lyrical subject, that incarnates a narrator—which actively demonstrates that there is a specific voice, which participates in the specific structure

of the poetic object, and that narrates something. In the case of *The Waste Land* of Eliot, although it consists of purely lyrical parts, evidently, there is a narrator. Throughout the poem, it becomes clear that a story is developing, as the quest for regeneration of a "wasteland."

The Narrative Structure of *The Waste Land*

In the beginning, this essay defined *The Waste Land* as a narrative text, which is essential to this analysis since the poem's structure represents the main object of this study. In the first instance, the presence of a specific narrator represents an essential feature of the definition of the poem as a narratological object of interest. Indeed, a narrator operates in Eliot's work as an external actor who tells a story to their narratees. However, through the progression of episodes or scenes that appear in the poem, the voices of these fragments do not seem to belong to a unique narratorial voice. Thus, the voice that appears in the first lines of the poem is not the only "character" who narrates in the story.

Indeed, the variety of tone and linguistic registers suggests that several narrators, or even a narrator of multiple voices, contribute to the narration of the poem. Furthermore, these voices refer to different events happening to various characters in various places and times. Indeed, the poem evokes the impression that the narration does not concern only one story but several fragments of different stories, and it appears almost impossible to follow time and space coordinates.

Furthermore, the whole structure of the poem does not consist only of the five sections, *The Burial of the Dead*, *A Game of Chess*, *The Fire Sermon*, *Death by Water* and *What the Thunder said*, as they occur along the poem. The first edition of *The Waste Land*, released in 1922 by Boni & Liveright, attached a supplement of notes to the original sections, and the use of these helps identify sources upon which Eliot has drawn inspiration. Moreover, they provide additional information about the materials of the poem. However, more importantly, these notes provoke such an effect on the reader that he cannot clearly understand the poem

itself. Due to their usefulness, they stimulate a sense of frustration. Indeed, many editions offer an additional apparatus of notes.

In his essay "The Frontiers of Criticism," Eliot himself recognised this apparatus as a "remarkable exposition of bogus scholarship" (109): this unusual use of notes can suggest they should not be read as a common appendix—and this introduces the second main character of the poem, the Editor. This voice is not on the same narrative level as the narrator mentioned above. Indeed, Francisco Collado Rodríguez observes that this voice can be assimilated to an "extradiegetic narrator with reference to the poem, as the narrator seems to be with reference to the story s/he tells in the poem: both entities, narrator and Editor, appear above the issues they deal with and should therefore possess an ironic view distanced from their objects" (Rodríguez 51).

The structure of Eliot's poem resembles an organic—though fragmented—work. Indeed, this conception helps delineate the different communicative levels that operate within *The Waste Land*, whose structure permits a division into divergent levels, each representing the different communicative degrees that operate within *The Waste Land*.

Indeed, the story itself represents the deepest level of the poem's structure. In this level, no narrator speaks singularly and explicitly. Indeed, there is an evident presence of a narrator of multiple voices that correlate with the several fragments mentioned previously in this essay. Moreover, these fragments seem to refer to the narrated events and concern several characters, which do not seem to be interrelated by the canonical temporal and spatial coordinates. To be more accurate, the several episodes narrated on this level recall the idea that they could be interrelated by the figure of the narrator and their mental association.

More explicitly, Rodríguez indicates that this narrator sometimes addresses their narratee through literary references, as in line 76, in which the exclamation "*hypocrite lecteur!*"

- *mon semblable, - mon frère!*" attempts to break the "barrier" which separates the level of the narrator from the reader's level.

Furthermore, these narrative instances display a firm separation. In the first five sections, the Narrator of the story narrates a series of events, although the different sequences present these episodes in a peculiar order. Within the final notes, the editor places himself above the narrator, as its voice assumes more a stance of a critic than a narrating voice in the process of interpreting this poem.

Michael Levenson drew the importance of such a distinction, as he marked a connection with the late essay of Eliot, *The Three Voices of Poetry*, in which the poet delineated a taxonomy of the possibilities in which voices can appear in poetry. Most specifically, in this essay, Eliot presents voice as "address," the "directness of speech towards an audience or through a character": indeed, the first variety of voice is the one "of the poet talking to himself—or to nobody," the second occurrence is the voice of "the poet addressing an audience, whether large or small;" the latter is "the voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character speaking in verses" (Eliot 7).

The Voices within *The Waste Land*

Firstly, the analysis concentrates on the voices which characterise the poem as they emerge along the lines of Eliot's work. Indeed, the analysis of these voices might delineate the multi-structure of this masterpiece. Indeed, the term "voicing" might suit better the definition of voice, as the shifts between the acts of speech are usually excessively quick to permit stabling personhood.

Nevertheless, in *The Waste Land*, characters are a confluence of images, which resemble a situation in which the individuals melt into each other, giving the impression that they originate outside the world of the observer. Then, the characterisation of the voices which emerge from the poem seems noticeable.

While the poem identifies most voices solely because of the distinct characteristic of tone, some characters possess a name. Interestingly, the evocated names, as Marie, Madame Sosostris, and Philomel, belong to female-speaking voices. Indeed, in Eliot's poem, all women live within dramatic plots that evoke a striking narrative since *The Waste Land* depicts their voices as released by the verses which contain them.

According to Levenson, the intrusive cry of Philomel—defined as "inviolable" in the poem—represents the "originary" voicing of *The Waste Land* (Levenson 92): in her voice are embodied all the women's voices, echoed within the poem—as emphasised in Eliot's note on verse 218, in which he claims that "all women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias" (Eliot 23). Historically, the myth of Philomel derives from the *Metamorphosis of Ovid*, belonging to the Classical literary tradition, as Tiresias is connected to the Greek tradition.

These references to the literary tradition of the past highlight the fact that all speeches acquire an authoritative tone from the inherited voices of the past. The utterance "I Tiresias" (Eliot 13), which introduces the character, expresses the intensity of self-consciousness using the first personal pronoun and proper name, highlighting the struggle of identification within a world of disorder. The task embodied in their speech is to see and, more specifically, "to foretell": a more precise indication is supplied by Eliot in his note 218, in which Tiresias is recognised as the most important character—or voice—in the poem: "What Tiresias see, in fact, is the substance of the poem" (Eliot 23).

In particular, the voice which opens the poem, as previously stated, does not seem to belong to any particular character, and the work of Levenson highlighted this feature. Indeed, the openings of each section in *The Waste Land* do not have any overt reference to a speaker: these consist of descriptive utterances, and Levenson points out how each opening can be seen as a declaration that "points outward toward a condition of the world." Speech becomes the

assertion of fact through simple syntax and vocabulary, "scenes are surveyed from apparent detached and all-seeing vantage points" (Levenson 89). Metaphors and similes suggest a break in the neutrality of view, preparing a contrast that becomes clear, opposing the openings and the closings of each section.

Indeed, the closing verses consist of forcefully accented speech, which is not oriented towards any description. Indeed, they represent strong personal statements: these transitions are recurrent during each section—and Levenson sees these passages as signifiers of the "movement from the documentary eye to a strong personal statement" (Levenson 89), tracking the voices which occur through the poem. Moreover, these shifts mark a local repetition within the five sections, which identifies the rhythm. Overall, these contrasts mean a passage from the first gnomic utterances to personal ones.

Moreover, the importance of the context of voice is fundamentally recalled by the poet in the early title of the poem, "He Do the Police in Different Voices." Indeed, Levenson suggests this title might imply a connection to the range of implications that the notion of "voice" recalls, including performance, polyphony, and physicality. Furthermore, Eliot's original title for the poem does not only suggest, as claimed by Emery-Peck in her essay *Tom and Vivien Eliot Do Narrative in Different Voices: Mixing Genres in 'The Waste Land's' Pub*, "the interest in voice and in the types of readerly performance made possible by narrative fiction" (Emery-Peck 331): the early title is borrowed from Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*, and this reference represents the first intertextual allusion that characterises the continuous lineage of references linked to his literary ancestors.

As highlighted by Emery-Peck, this definition is taken from the description of the reading practice of Sloppy, a foundling who reads the newspaper aloud. In referencing this passage, Eliot does not only stress the description of a reader who plays with the possibilities of storytelling. The direct quotation of Dickens's citation, in recalling the ability of a figure of

a working-class man, who renders the experience of reading a polyvocal narrative adventure, also echoes the multitude of voices evocated along the poem, anticipating the narrative technique described so far.

In the end, as demonstrated by the previous analysis, *The Waste Land* does not present a traditional and linear plot. Indeed, the structure of the poem—as emerges from this inquiry—suffers from a proper lack of action. Nevertheless, the textual dimension of Eliot's work exists properly, and it emerges from the articulation of the voices and patterns in which these perspectives alternate through the sections of the poem.

Indeed, these voices function as sources of meaning, as they delineate the path designed by the poem. Indeed, the narrative meaning of *The Waste Land* does not lie in the existence of a linear plot. Instead, the lines of the poem resemble a circular structure built on the voices of the poem. Eventually, analysing the voices of the poem, Eliot's characters emerge directly from a wasteland to the surface of the text, achieving an effect of a weave in and out. Indeed, the narrative meaning of *The Waste Land* exists through the emergence of these voices, as the narrative structure of the poem relies on the sequences through which the lines of the poem evoke different voices.

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